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LONDON BOUND

Mark Noce

An archipelago of airy clouds lingered over the mustard colored fields as they blurred behind the curve of plexiglas. Reed choked rivulets and towers of decaying redbrick chimneys flashed beside the tracks and then disappeared amidst miniscule outlines of sheds and farmhouses clustered along the rolling horizon. He closed his eyes, inhaling the recycled air-conditioning through his dilated nostrils while stray locks of his tawny hair fell across his headphones. An open spiral notebook lay atop his dusty backpack, its bruised leaves crammed full of black and blue cursive that spilled out into the margins where frayed confetti bits from hairy pages littered the coffee stained fleur-de-lis carpet. His seat seemed to squeeze his ribcage, the force of the slowing car leaning him forward on his cushion. The youth's dark, agate eyes stared down at his peppered blue jeans, spider-webbed around the kneecaps. He scratched the underside of his unshaven chin, surveying the golden stubble across the fields grinding to a halt as the train brakes groaned beneath the floor.

A woman across the aisle thumbed her wedding ring. She pressed her cell phone through her ringlets of tanned, silver hair and murmured French into her hand. The young man tugged at his walkman, his headset sinking down toward his collarbone as the din of tramping feet reached his ears. He narrowed his eyebrows, furrowing thick creases across his forehead, while glancing down the long rows of passengers towards the vanishing point of upholstered chairs. A Parisian voice croaked into the loudspeaker, muffled against the hum of crackling radio static and shifting carryon cases between compartment bulkheads. His neck began to sweat and the youth felt the hairs along the nape of his spine stand on end as old men in frocks and young girls clutching quivering purses stammered questions towards their neighbors in a myriad of languages and dia-

lects. The indecipherable speaker on the intercom ceased.

"Pardon," the youth asked from his seat as he leaned over towards the woman across the aisle. "Par le vous ingles?"

The woman let her palm fall into her lap, still clutching the phone tightly between her trembling digits. Her marble-wet eyes waxed round as she glanced at the young man. She stuffed her cell phone into her satchel, hiding her shaking fingers beneath the folds of its leather bindings. He noticed a maple leaf stitched onto her jacket. She looked right through him as though he were as transparent as the wraith-like apparition of his milky reflection cast upon the grey, rectangular window.

"Bombs are going off in London," she replied, her gaze sinking to the floor. "We're too close to the Chunnel. Everyone's cell phones are dead."

"Bombs?" he echoed, to which she nodded fervently.

Flocks of schoolchildren rumbled past his seat, most teary-eyed and sobbing as they tugged or abandoned their cumbersome duffle bags and black rollers. Backpackers, elderly, transients, and commuters clad in suits leapt down the narrow corridors and steel stairways as they spilled out onto the platform. The young man leaned over in his seat, digging through papers and clothes stuffed inside his daypack. Beneath his last pair of clean socks and boxers he found his passport and a few sallow bills in euros, dollars, and pounds. He glanced out the grey windows, watching crowds of locals, tourists, and travelers bounding through the terminals towards the exits. His hand felt a small case of boiled leather as he peered back down into his bag where a handful of worn letters and envelopes protruded. He lifted a single photograph that had fallen out of his bag, holding it up to the light as more frantic Eurail customers abandoned the train. An image of a young woman smiled back at him from the photograph, her chestnut hair dangling in the breeze while a pair of horses galloped through the rolling grasslands behind her. Etched within a heart on the back of the picture he read the inscription: "To my Sweet-heart, with all my love, 2005." He grinned with a frown before putting the photo away, zipping up his pack and placing it in the vacant seat next to him.

He stood up now, the once boisterous cabins of the train now silent except for the reverberating footsteps of conductors pacing through the open doorways. Only a handful of people remained in the large passenger car. A short, dark haired woman conversed in French with one of the train attendants while a bearded backpacker spread his arms over a window and squinted out at the saffron fields and wide hedgerows of Normandy. The young man gazed down at the Canadian woman, still seated in her chair while she pounded on the keypad of her phone relentlessly. With a frustrated gasp she finally hurled the cell into her valise, pressing her skull back into the headrest.

"I was supposed to be at a friend's wedding," she said aloud, shaking her head. "I can't even reach my husband in Southwark."

"Will they let us through the Chunnel?" the young man inquired.

"I don't know," the woman replied. "I was talking with my sister before the phones went out. They're closing down the entire country. Nothing gets in or out. They might make us get off the train."

"If there's even a chance, I'll wait it out," the youth murmured. "I have to get into London."

The man across the car continued peering out the hazy windows, craning his neck through every opening and porthole.

"I can't see a thing," he scoffed in a thick cockney. "They're not telling us what's happening. Who's even responsible for all this?"

The young man glanced at the bearded Brit shuffling between windows. He glanced over his shoulder as the French woman came back to her seat while the conductor passed between them and jogged into the next car. She turned to him, the Canadian, and the Englishman as they peered back at her.

"They say they're going try and cross the channel," she began in broken English. "All other trains north of Paris have been sent back to Gare du Nord."

"What happens if we do get across?" the Brit asked, placing his elbows on a nearby recliner.

"Some railway stations in London may have been hit," the French woman replied slowly. "We might have to transfer lines or book another coach."

"My phone is out of service," the Canadian woman mentioned.

"Mine too," the French lady replied. "Hopefully on the other side we can get some...reception."

"How long does it take to cross the euro tunnel?" the Canadian asked as she looked up at the youth across the aisle.

"About twenty minutes," he replied, glancing at his three companions.

The train budged forward and began moving again. All four returned to their seats, but remained half standing as they fidgeted with their belongings. The same gravelly voice grated on the speakers, mumbling briefly before clicking the receiver down.

"What did he say?" the youth asked the Canadian.

"He apologized that the English speaking conductor was sick today," she answered. "But we do have clearance to cross the channel."

With that the windows went black. Track lighting along the ceilings and runways illuminated their reflections against the depthless void outside. The whirring drone of the engines sped through the midnight darkness surrounding the cab. The youth cupped his face to the glass, peering out into the fathomless pitch as they descended deeper beneath the sea-bottom of the English Channel.

He popped the cassette tape out of his Sony. As he put away the walkman he noticed

the fm/am function beside the volume. Pulling the earphones over his scalp he pressed the right one to his earlobe and flipped on the radio. A sickly buzz growled against his eardrum. Ripping them off, he let the headset sink down to his throat as he swallowed hard and closed his eyes. His feet chilled under the sweat from his socks amidst the vacuum of AC within the nearly emptied compartments. He listened to his pumping heart and inflated lungs, moving in time with the beat of the wheels bounding along the metal railway.

Sunlight grazed his eyelids. He blinked his dried contacts, rewetting them with eye-drop solution. Shadows congealed across undulating braes of southern Britain as an overcast sky blotted out the noonday glow. The young man spied the two women seated near him mashing their index fingers into their phones. Both put down their antennas, sighing heavily.

"Still nothing?" he asked her.

The Canadian shook her head.

He stood up again, raising his walkman aloft while his earpieces hugged his head. Running his thumb along the tuning dial he listened to the gurgle of human voices wafting in through the garbled airwaves. He gasped, catching the Brit's attention from across the car.

"Jesus," the youth mumbled.

The commentator's static-choked speech tapered into the headset as the young man pressed his walkman to the ceiling and gazed down at the floor. "...Israel has been dealing with such incidents for some time...moving in the direction of a world with less tolerance...respect for human life. Now our correspondent reporting from Russell's Square:

"...the entire side of the building is covered in blood. At least six...have been detonated...London Police have sealed off all tube stations...no less than three explosions at King's Cross...as well. Once again...Edgeware Road, Liverpool...unconfirmed reports of casualties. Hospital emergency rooms are overcapacity. All coaches in and out of the metropolitan area are being search...sniffer dogs dispatched to Heathrow Airport where...Terminal Three closed under...bomb threats. Over eighty civilians here...being treated for wounds...Russell's Square."

The station fizzed out, breaking up amidst live audio clips of screams and sirens replayed in the last hour. Scanning the radio waves he found several more news programs all too patchy to discern. Finally, he found a clear channel with a pair of commentators debating in French. He looked down to see the Canadian on her phone, her lips moving. The youth pulled off his headset as she snapped her cell shut.

"My sister says half a dozen explosions have gone off so far," she began. "She can't get off her street. The police have blocked off every avenue leading to or from her building.

Most of the roads in London have been quartered off. She couldn't talk anymore. The networks are being overused with calls and the authorities are asking people to stay off the lines unless it's an emergency."

"What could you get on the radio?" the Brit asked the youth.

"I had something before, but now it's all in French," he said, offering the headphones to the French woman beside them. "Tube stations and busses have been hit. Edgeware Road, King's Cross maybe, and I think the Circle Line is out. They've closed all underground stops."

"God, I was just in all those places a couple weeks ago," the Brit stammered.

"Me too," the youth added.

"They think there may still be more bombs that haven't gone off yet," the French woman said as she pressed her ear to the headphones. "They're asking everyone to evacuate central London."

The cars began to slow. All four of them looked about as the train halted beside a small, rural station. Telegraph wires ran beside the tracks while a herd of foraging cattle grazed beside them. A pair of conductors hopped off the front end of the train, striding briskly towards a pair of operators emerging from a cracked stucco entranceway. The four passengers inside the compartment continued speaking amongst themselves, guessing at what the rumors meant and what lay ahead waiting for them at Waterloo Station.

"It seems that they're hitting transportation," the Brit said.

"We're lucky the railways and airlines are still intact," the youth replied.

"Don't say that!" the Canadian woman shrieked as she rapped her knuckles along the wooden arm of her chair.

The French woman silently handed back the walkman.

He managed to secure another radio station, transmitting death tolls, collateral damage, and unconfirmed reports from within the city where apparently some news channels had actually lost contact with their reporters in the field. More audio clips of police, fire, and rescue teams resounded amidst the background of bleeding injured retelling their own accounts amidst the pandemonium of the maimed and dying. British, Scottish, Irish, and American accents all appeared in multiple interviews.

The railcars gained speed again, bypassing tangled transformers, rusted church steeples, and neatly planted rows of birch and pine. Edging towards one of the forward windows, the youth leaned beside the Brit as the pair watched the rushing landscape. Behind them, and out of earshot, the French and Canadian spoke with occasionally forced smiles as a train attendant paced in the open aisles.

"Nothing moving out there," the Brit whispered to the youth. "Not seen a person nor a sparrow. Can't even tell what towns we're passing through."

"I saw a graveyard a ways back," the youth mentioned, instantly sobering his features

after the comment.

The Englishman rubbed his hairy Adam's apple, fixing his robin egg irises on the youth.

"You from New York, Yank?" he asked.

"California," the youth replied.

"Long way from home," the Brit remarked.

"It's past three in the morning there," the youth responded. "Everyone will be waking up soon, turning on the T.V. and I can't even get so much as a phone call or an email back to them."

"Be thankful they're far away from here," the Brit commented. "My old Lady and boy live in Manchester now. But I'll be lucky if I make it as far as the capitol tonight. Sweet Mary, think of all the commuters working today. They wont be able to get back home at all."

"Wonder what it'll be like when we get back into the city," the youth mused.

"Maybe deserted," the Brit surmised. "You know, everyone is to stay in their homes. Be just like some Hollywood movie after the end of the world. No one in their right mind be heading into London on a day like this."

"Except us," the young American replied.

"Yeah," the cockney chuckled. "Just us."

More and more brown-brick buildings came into view. Clusters of apartments, their windows retaining the salt and pepper haze of a blackened sky, rose among narrow streets, elm lined parkways, and ivy covered cement walls. Tall, silver-edged structures towered along the horizon with the other monuments of central London hovering in the distance. All four passengers gathered their belongings as the train slowed beside the grey pillars of Waterloo.

"Where you headed?" the Canadian asked the youth once he reached his seat.

"Heathrow, I fly home tomorrow," he replied. "I hope."

"Airport may be the only thing operating now," she replied. "That's where I'm headed."

"I need to change everything I've got into pounds," he said. "I originally expected to take the tube, but guess that's out of the question now."

"Good luck," she wished him.

He replied in kind as the intercom crackled on.

"Welcome to London, business as usual," the conductor signed off in his heavily accented English.

Stepping off the train steps, he hustled along the causeway with his backpack full of jingling zippers and weathered button straps. A score of security officers stood waiting as the two dozen or so passengers from the entire train walked towards customs. The men and women in neon vests and coal-black helms watched silently as the new arrivals

filed in between the gauntlet. He pulled out his passport, but continued walking past the guards and towards a kiosk near the glass-paned exit.

He pushed all his cash under the teller's window, not glancing once at the exchange rate. The Brit stood in the line next to him while they gathered their money. The two exited together, rotating through the double doors.

"The Bobbies didn't even check us or anything," he remarked. "Of all the days to be lax on security."

"Guess they figured we got stamped on the French side," the youth supposed.

"Cost more than fifty quid to grab a cab from here to Heathrow," the Brit began. "But that don't matter, because the lady at the desk told me that there are no taxis. They're the only thing left operating in the whole city and not nearly enough to go round. She said my chances of grabbing a ride anywhere is one in a million."

"Then what will everyone do?" the American asked.

"Walk," the Brit scoffed. "Only thing left."

"But it's twenty miles to Heathrow from here," the youth stated.

"Look," the Brit pointed with his finger.

A procession of people sauntered along the walkways and streets, marching through the city with the other refugees. As he hiked along, the youth spied men in ties and women in high heels streaming away from a red-circle tube-stop sign. He nodded towards one woman as she walked beside him.

"What a day," he remarked.

"I was on my way to the office," she nodded. "A man came running down and told us all the station was going to blow. I thought I would perish when we scaled up the steps."

"Some of the metro terminals are several stories underground," the young man nodded.

"Take care of yourself, lad," she smiled before disappearing with a troop of people moving down the next alleyway.

He waved goodbye before rejoining the Brit from the train as they paced down the boulevards where a gathering tide of the city's populous joined together like tiny streams running into a larger river. The crimson bearded man beside him shrugged his shoulders.

"So much for deserted," he remarked.

The youth paused, grabbing him by the shoulder. He looked over towards a black cab across the intersection where the Canadian from the train stood talking with the man behind the steering wheel. Both the Brit and the American bolted for the car, racing towards the Canadian and French woman as they stepped inside.

"We'll split the fare four ways, from here to the airport," the youth pleaded.

"You'll have to sit on your bags, but get in," the driver commanded.

The pair nodded their heads in thanks at the two ladies as they crammed luggage and all into the compartment. Circling observers began to advance towards the cab as the motor started up. They raced off through the throngs of pedestrians, the transmission shifting through its gears as they headed up an onramp.

Below they spied the Thames to the north. The youth spotted the dome of St. Paul's rising into the charred skyline. A V of cranes soared above the rooftops and shaded in the metropolis below. The car jolted atop the overpass and down towards traffic choked side streets.

"I wonder if this is what it felt like during the Blitz," the youth murmured to himself as he surveyed the scene.

"Sir, do you know anything about what's happening?" the Canadian asked the driver through the mesh screen. "What's it like in the heart of the city?"

"Chaos," the man brooded. "Complete and utter chaos. I just came from there. Most main arteries through town have been cut off. There's only one way left if I'm going to get you all to Heathrow, and if they shut that down we'll all be stuck here for certain."

Each of them thanked the man for picking them up and asked him more about what he had seen. He spoke over his shoulder, spinning the wheel and shifting the stick beside him as he revved the clutch through a tangle of trafficking motorists. The youth spied people with suitcases on their laps and bags stuffed beside their faces as they peered out of car windows at one another. Some smiled, others nodded, and a few even flashed peace signs. By the time they reached the main thoroughfare the roadway had succumbed to complete gridlock. A dump truck maneuvered down one alleyway while an escort of police motorcycles surrounded a bulldozer headed downtown. Men in striped grey and dark Armani jackets stepped out of their cabs, racing between the stopped vehicles towards the outlines of the airport in the distance. On the other side of the freeway fire engines and ambulances whizzed past them towards the epicenter of London while the choppy report of helicopters murmured in the cloud cover above.

As they left the city limits behind, each gave the addresses of their hotels. Time slipped by slowly while they waded through the jammed car lanes, watching Heathrow gradually loom closer. They spoke of hostels in Paris, the cathedral at Notre Dame. Apparently it was raining in Amsterdam, and a great beer festival had just finished in Cologne. The youth looked out the grimy cab windows and spied the scarlet rays of the setting sun blooming just over the barley plains to the west. A 777 boomed overhead as Marriott, Hyatt, and Sheridan signs appeared beside the off ramps.

"I can see army trucks out on the tarmacs," the cabbie remarked. "The military used to patrol out here back in the days when the IRA threatened to take down planes from the hotel rooftops."

They pulled up at the American's hotel first. He took out the last of his pound notes

from his wallet and handed them to the driver. The man refused to accept, citing that it was bad for business to be charging stranded travelers. Amidst protestations from all four in the cab, he accepted a gratuitous tip from each of them. A pair of men in smoky-grey suits helped the youth out of the car, spiral earpieces protruding from their collars and holstered side-arms beneath their coats. Several police officers and soldiers looked on from around the hotel while a camouflage Hummer purred behind the corner.

"Take care of yourself, chap," the maroon bearded man in the cab said, shaking the youth's hand.

"The name's Christopher, my friends call me Kit," the American replied.

"Safe journey home, Kit," the Brit grinned.

He waved goodbye as the cab drove off. The men in dark glasses ushered him inside with a brisk politeness. Stepping into the lobby with his dusty sneakers and soiled backpack, the youth looked round at glittering chandeliers and a polished ivory-keyed grand piano. He checked in at the front desk where the concierge informed him of several messages received from multiple parties all addressed to him. Kit glanced at the letterheads that all spelt U.S.A. in block font. He took his room key and asked for the nearest phone. The youth thanked the front desk staff as he retreated towards a private booth. Kit closed the wooden door behind him, sat down on his threadbare pack and slipped his phone card into the machine as he dialed the code. When he lifted the receiver to his ear it was already ringing. 